

Where the lure of the seaside encounters the lure of the East ...

Orientalist architecture as a constituent element in 19th-century Belgian coastal resorts.

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While formerly the few evidences of human presence were nestled in the dunes, the 19th-century tourists who were frequenting the Belgian seaside, longed for a different infrastructure. Fishermen's villages were far from being convenient for the wealthy bourgeoisie who were imagining holiday playgrounds which were architecturally trendy and provided with all kinds of modern comfort.

In an attempt to transform sea resorts in exotic microcosms with hedonist leanings, oriental features were generously applied. Orientalism, which was permeated by a romantic escapism and contemporary political issues, developed into a widespread style for leisure architecture. Influenced by travel diaries, novels, drawings and paintings, architects endeavoured to establish a three-dimensional Orient on European soil. Since the East was associated with earthly delights, the orientalist architecture incorporated connotations which were opposed to the prevailing morality and the common life. Orientalist settings can thus be seen as utopian worlds where fantasy and reality encountered. The building typology on which it was applied, speaks volumes: kiosks, grand hotels, casinos, exhibition pavilions, drawing rooms, etc.

The progressive nature of the young Belgian state (°1830) and its susceptibility for external ideas, made Belgium paradigmatic for the nineteenth century Western world. By creating a distinct profile for themselves, the Belgian watering places, which were initially grafted onto the British ones, became internationally famous. Orientalness was a typical branding mechanism, and was noticeably applied in cities like Ostend and Blankenberghe.